

Museum

Jan Lavrinovski

All rights reserved

Contents

Aftermath.....	1
The Museum.....	19
Dimming Flame.....	25
The Weight of Time.....	30
Cold Machinery.....	35
Quiet.....	45

Aftermath

The city had no name anymore. It had been erased not from maps, but from breath. Where streets once bustled with life, now only dust moved—thick, pale, clinging to every surface like a slow decay turned solid. Concrete blocks, dislodged from the collapsed faces of buildings, lay in heaps where people once stood waiting for buses or leaning into conversations. Steel rebar curled like tendrils from the ruins, blackened and twisted. A faint yellow mist hung over everything, not fog but fallout, sour and dry in the lungs, sifting down slowly as if time itself had turned to powder.

Half a trolleybus lay embedded in the wreckage of a shopping kiosk, its pantograph still reaching skyward like a severed limb searching for a line that no longer existed. The seats inside were charred, springs exposed, melted plastic clinging to the floor in the shape of forgotten bodies. Nearby, a GAZ-21 smoldered silently, its roof collapsed inward, all windows blown out, doors ajar as if someone had tried to flee and never made it. Across the intersection, another car—a Moskvitch—lay flipped on its side, tires melted into the pavement, its trunk flung open like a gutted animal.

Among the debris, domestic wreckage was scattered as if the wind had rearranged the contents of thousands of private lives. A wardrobe cracked in half rested on the curb, spilling a heap of faded dresses, coats, and children's sweaters across the rubble. A broken turntable leaned against a shattered porcelain sink, the record still on it warped and blackened. A stuffed bear sat upright in the middle of the road, its fur half-burned, one button eye missing, arms outstretched in mute welcome or warning.

The skeletal remains of apartment blocks loomed on either side—hollow towers whose windows gaped like mouths. Curtains hung stiff with soot. Bedsheets flapped gently in the windless air. Here and there, a body lay slumped in dust, some twisted beneath concrete slabs, others sprawled awkwardly against rusted fences or slouched on stairwells that led nowhere. Their faces had long since lost identity—only the posture of death remained, each frozen gesture a story cut off mid-sentence.

Overhead, a haze stained the sky the color of dried blood mixed with sand. Shadows fell wrongly, diffused through the poisonous light. Somewhere in the distance, metal groaned—slow, deep, the language of things that once bore weight but had forgotten their names. Birds were gone. The silence that stretched through the streets was not empty—it was thick, like something alive, listening.

What remained of the old central library stood at the edge of this hushed grave. Its walls cracked and leaning, domed roof collapsed into itself. Books, soaked and ash-covered, lay in heaps at the foot of the stairs. Ink ran like blood across their pages. The great reading hall was open to the sky, where once lamps had glowed and pages turned. Now it was only a wound in the earth, sheltering what little warmth might still remain.

Drip.
Drip.
Drip.

The sound echoed through the damp stone chamber, a slow and steady rhythm that had become a kind of music to Sergei Kirillyts. He sat hunched at the wooden table, a thin man wrapped in a coarse, handmade sweater, its fibers knotted unevenly, dyed in stripes of dull ochre and black. His green velvet trousers, creased and stained at the knees, brushed against the cold flagstone as he shifted in his chair. His glasses, thick as coins, rested precariously on the slope of his nose, glinting in the trembling light of the single bulb that hung overhead, its filament wavering slightly with every pulse of current through the bare wire.

The room smelled of rust and wet paper. Mold clung to the walls like old paint. Rusty mugs—some still bearing faded sports slogans from the 1970s—were stacked on a crooked shelf. A child's wooden feeding chair, its backrest carved with crude bears and stars, stood abandoned near the boiler. Next to it, an empty condensed milk can lay on its side, a trail of dried sugar crusted to the floor beneath. A box of tangled wires leaned against a radiator that hadn't worked in decades. In the far corner, a crate labeled "Melodiya" held a stack of vinyl records—folk songs, military marches, a warped Tchaikovsky.

Sergei's fingers, long and spotted, turned a page of the heavy book on his lap. *Fossils and Megafauna of the Past*, stamped in bold Cyrillic, its cover mottled and soft from moisture, gave off the faint scent of old leather and printer's glue. He read with silent devotion, lips moving just enough to form the names of long-dead creatures.

"Mammuthus trogontherii," he whispered. "Tusk curvature indicates sexual dimorphism... Habitat range extended across the entire Eurasian plain. Before the glaciers returned."

He paused, fingertips brushing the image of a mammoth skull drawn in stark black ink. The beast's sockets stared back, deep and hollow.

His gaze lifted from the book, drifting toward the slick, pitted ceiling above. A single droplet fell and splashed beside the table, just missing the stack of yellowed index cards cataloguing herbivores of the Miocene. His shoulders rose and fell with a long breath, followed by a soft cough. He pulled a cloth handkerchief from his pocket and held it briefly to his mouth. When he lowered it, a rust-colored stain marred the faded linen.

"I survived," he muttered, low and hoarse. "But what is the point of this, in such a world?"

The question fell unanswered into the stillness. There was no reply—only the drip of water, the hum of the bulb, and the slow breath of mildew growing in forgotten corners.

He turned back to the page, eyes sharpening behind the thick lenses.

"Indricotherium," he read aloud. "Largest land mammal in Earth's history. Over five meters tall at the shoulder. Browsed on high canopies. Bones discovered in Central Asia, 1913, reclassified twice."

He tilted the book closer to the light. The drawing was faint but still clear: a massive, horse-like creature with a long neck and solemn gaze.

“To imagine,” he murmured, “that such a thing once walked where we now burn. And now...”

He did not finish. His eyes drifted again toward the iron door at the far end of the cellar. Like the hatch of a submarine, its wheel-lock was half-turned, the heavy frame wedged open. It had been designed for containment, for dryness, for preservation, though nothing inside had been worth much even before the war. A museum of dust. But its thickness had saved him, and a few others, from the wave of heat and radiation that had roared over the city.

Now it yawned like a mouth too tired to speak.

He adjusted his glasses, pulled the blanket tighter around his legs, and turned the page again. The past, after all, had survived in bones and earth. And perhaps, in its silence, it offered a kind of answer no living world ever had.

“Megatherium,” he read. “The great ground sloth. Herbivorous, yet unyielding. Extinct fifteen thousand years ago.”

Sergei turned another page, though he was no longer reading. The shapes of ancient beasts blurred before his eyes, their massive skeletons dissolving into patterns of bone and shadow. His gaze drifted, unfocused, to the water stain that spread across the far wall like a continent in slow formation.

He sat still for a long time, and then his thoughts began to unfold, slow and steady, like an old machine returning to motion.

“Why were we born at all?”

He closed the book, resting his palms on the cover as if to seal the question inside. “Every thing exists because of its cause—its form, its purpose, its final aim. But what was ours? We had form, certainly; two arms, two legs, minds that reasoned. But purpose?”

The bulb flickered. Shadows trembled across the damp ceiling.

“We built cities, yes. We learned to split the atom, to write poetry, to name the stars. Yet we never asked why the stars bothered to exist at all. Perhaps that is why they will outlast us.”

He leaned back slightly, his spine creaking like the chair beneath him.

“If the soul was immortal, that it merely forgets its origin when born into flesh. If that is true, then all this— he looked around the moldy room, the relics of a dead civilization, —“is only memory misplaced. Perhaps we die only to remember what we once were.”

He rubbed his temples. “But what if there is no soul? What if we are only dust that learned to question its own decay? A temporary alignment of atoms, just long enough to ask the one question the universe never needed answered: Why?”

The drip resumed, louder now, as though answering him.

“If the soul exists, it must be heavy,” he thought. “Heavy enough to bend the air when it leaves the body. I have seen men die. The air changes. Perhaps it is only breath. Perhaps it is eternity escaping through the throat.”

He looked at his hands—thin, trembling, blue at the knuckles.

“We invented gods to quiet the fear of silence. We built philosophy to give silence form. But now, with the world ended, only silence remains. Does that mean truth has returned? Or only that it no longer needs us to speak it?”

His eyes wandered to the book again. The page had fallen open to the image of a fossilized fish, preserved mid-swim, its bones splayed like fragile wings.

“This creature once moved through oceans that no longer exist. Its bones rest now in stone, waiting for eyes like mine to rediscover them. Perhaps that is the soul’s secret—it does not fly upward, but sinks downward, into memory, until time erodes enough to reveal it again.”

He pressed his hand over the illustration and whispered into the stillness, “Maybe we exist so that someone—or something—could remember.”

Then he sat back, letting the words fade into the hum of the wire, the rhythm of dripping water, and the vast, indifferent patience of stone.

Sergei closed the book with deliberate care and set it down beside the stack of yellowing pages. His back creaked as he stood, joints stiff from hours spent in one position. The sweater clung to his thin frame like bark to an old tree. He moved slowly, feet wrapped in patched wool socks sliding over the damp stone floor. The bulb above him swayed faintly as he passed beneath it, casting crooked shadows on the mold-lined walls.

The corridor beyond was dim and narrow, its walls sweating. Bare wires traced the ceiling like veins, disappearing into rusted junction boxes. Sergei walked in silence, his hand brushing the wall for balance, then paused at a heavy steel door. He grasped the handle—cold and pitted—and pulled. Metal groaned like an old man stirred from sleep.

Inside, the room was small and low-ceilinged. A dented table sat under a strip of broken fluorescent light that hadn’t worked since the blast. The refrigerator in the corner was older than either of them, its enamel chipped, the handle held together with twisted wire. Sergei opened it and leaned in. Rows of cans lined the shelves, their labels curled, their contents long suspect.

He took one without reading it—meat with potatoes, if memory served—and peeled the lid open with his thumbnail. The metal creaked. The smell was faintly sour, but no worse than usual. He fetched a tarnished fork from the table’s edge and sat on the wooden taburet, its legs uneven. Then he ate. Slowly. No rush. One bite at a time. In the silence, each chew echoed off the walls.

A few minutes passed. Then footsteps. Jelena entered, her boots scuffing against the stone. She wore black pants that had once been formal, and a stretched, grayish sweater with a faded flower near the collar. It might have been pink once. Her face was pale, streaked with grime, and her neck bore the telltale lesions—brownish, cracked along the edges, blooming slowly like rot through bark. She hadn't washed in a week. Neither had Sergei.

Without a word, she opened the refrigerator and squinted inside. Her finger hovered over the cans. She counted silently—lips barely moving—then sighed. She took one, the same type as Sergei, and sat across from him. They ate without speaking. The sound of forks scraping metal, the hum of silence.

Jelena broke it.

"The bolt on the generator came loose again. It's missing now."

Sergei didn't look up. "Which one?"

"The grounding strut. Lower right housing. It rattles when it runs."

He stabbed a piece of potato and chewed slowly. "That strut's fixed to the base rail. Takes a twelve-thread bolt. Not too long or the vibration cracks the frame."

"I don't know what you just said, but the thing shakes like hell."

"It'll hold for now," he muttered. "Probably. Unless someone leans on it."

"I'd feel better if it didn't sound like it wants to die."

Sergei sighed through his nose. "Alright. I'll check the stash."

He wiped his mouth on his sleeve and stood, knees popping. The air seemed colder now. With a slow drag of the chair, he turned and shuffled out of the room. The hall narrowed further past the main corridor, leading to a metal grate set into the floor. A ladder descended into deeper dark. He gripped the rungs and eased himself down, one foot at a time, breath catching with each motion.

Below, the air was heavier—thick with oil, rust, and time. This room had no memory of light. Shelves lined the walls, bowed beneath decades of junk: rusted saws, coffee tins of bolts, gas masks with cracked filters, vacuum tubes, gears, pipe fragments, and drawers filled with wire and dust. He lit a stub of candle from the wall and held it aloft.

He pulled a box from one shelf, labeled in chalk: "МЕТИЗЫ." Inside were screws, washers, cotter pins—most brown, some black, all useless. He rummaged through them with his long fingers, muttering.

"Damn it... nothing but skeletons."

He checked another shelf, kicked an empty canister aside, then spotted the edge of something under an old tarpaulin. He pulled it free—a motor, heavy and black, the casing stamped with the name ИЖ. From a motorcycle. Pre-war. He smiled faintly.

“Well, let’s rob the dead.”

He squatted, squinting. The casing bolt on the left side was just the right size. He took a spanner from the crate beneath the shelf and began working it loose. The threads resisted, but finally the bolt gave way with a rasp.

He climbed back up the ladder, breathing heavier now, and crossed the corridor to the generator room. The metal door was scratched and flaked, the floor beneath it stained with oil. Inside, the old generator growled with every breath. He shut it down. The lights cut out instantly, plunging the space into candlelit gloom.

The silence buzzed in his ears.

He set the candle on a shelf, opened the lower casing, and leaned in. The wire attachments had loosened again—cheap clips barely holding to the connectors. He tightened them with a screwdriver, cursing under his breath.

“Who the hell designed this thing? Drunken apes?”

The bolt hole was narrow, half-blocked by old paint and rust. He scraped it clean with a knife, lined the bolt up, and eased it into place, fingers stiff, breath shallow.

It fit.

He gave it a few turns with the wrench, firm but cautious. Then he poured some of the clean fuel—what little remained—into the tank from a dented canister, wiped his hands on his pants, and stood.

“Let’s see.”

He flipped the starter switch.

The generator sputtered, coughed once, then caught. The growl turned steady, low and rhythmic. The light bulb above the workbench flickered, then glowed.

Sergei exhaled through his teeth, long and slow.

“Well. Still breathing, old bastard.”

He closed the casing, gathered the tools, and stood in the doorway for a moment, watching the machine hum in the dark like a tired heart refusing to stop. Then he turned and walked back toward the flicker of the hall, dragging the smell of oil and old ghosts behind him.

Sergei shuffled into the side room where an old mattress lay crooked on the cracked linoleum floor, stained and stiff as parchment. Dust blanketed the edges, and cobwebs clung to the corners where the ceiling had crumbled. He lay down slowly, spine clicking, arms folding

over his chest. The cold pressed in through the floor. He closed his eyes, letting the stale air fill his lungs in shallow drafts.

Footsteps approached—he could tell by the weight and rhythm that it was Igor. The man entered, tall, gaunt, mid-forties, face hollowed by ash and time. Without a word, Igor went to the corner and opened a large crate. Inside was the rubber suit, gray-brown, wrinkled like elephant skin, with faded markings from some chemical unit. He shook it out, then began pulling it over his pants, the rubber squealing against itself. The scent of it was sour—sweat and age.

“You coming with me?” Igor asked as he zipped the suit up to his chest.

Sergei didn’t open his eyes. “No,” he rasped. “Too tired to move. Go. Be careful.”

Igor nodded, already fastening the straps. He grabbed a Russian gas mask from the wall—black, bulbous-eyed, with a long green filter—and fitted it over his face. The hiss of breath filled the room. He sat to pull on knee-high rubber boots, caked with old grime, and strapped them tight.

Then he took the green cloth bag, military issue from some forgotten decade, and slung it over his shoulder. A heavy metal flashlight, dented and wrapped in tape, he clipped to his belt.

He gave Sergei one last look through the round eyes of the mask. “If I’m not back before curfew, close the doors.”

Sergei just nodded, not moving.

Igor turned and left the room. He climbed slowly to the upper floors, boots thudding softly against stone steps. The air grew colder with each level, and the walls narrowed where rubble had pressed inward, squeezing the corridors like a fist. He climbed over a collapsed archway, squeezing through where the ceiling had dropped, catching his suit on a bent pipe before finally emerging into the open.

Outside, the wind struck him like a slap. It carried ash, metal dust, and a chemical stench that never went away. Bits of foil, plaster, wire, and torn clothing tumbled in the eddies between ruined buildings. The sky was dim yellow, bleeding into sickly brown, and the sun a pale smudge behind it all.

He stepped out carefully, the ruined city yawning before him. Everywhere: metal, broken glass, concrete teeth, cars overturned like dead insects. A bus lay on its side, hollowed out by fire, its rubber long since melted, black streaks running from the windows like mascara from a corpse.

Igor moved through it all in silence, boots squelching through mud and sludge. The block ahead had once been home to flats, markets, and a small factory, now all cracked open like eggshells. He passed a frame of a bicycle embedded in a wall, a child's sandal impaled on a pipe, and the mangled husk of what might have been a police car.

"We eat to live," he thought as he walked, "but living's not the same thing anymore. It's just not dying yet."

After thirty minutes of winding through debris, he reached the edge of an old street, the asphalt ripped and churned, mud thick and stinking in the potholes. Across it stood the shop. The sign above still clung to its bolts: "МАГАЗИН" in flaked red letters. The door was gone. Blown off. The windows were shattered inwards. Dust and wind moved freely through the space where trade once happened.

Igor stepped inside.

The floor was littered with broken shelves, smashed packaging, powder from flour and glass. Near the wall, something moved. He turned, hand on the flashlight. A dog. Hair patchy, skin blistered and raw, one eye milky, one ear torn. Its ribs jutted out like slats. It huddled in the corner, shaking, its nose twitching.

Igor stared for a moment. Then turned away.

"Not my business," he muttered through the mask. "You've made it this far. That's all we can ask."

He moved to the shelves. Most had been looted or crumbled, but here and there the forgotten remained. He reached up and pulled down a dusty plastic bag—"макароны" printed in faded blue. Dried pasta. He opened his bag and slipped it in.

At the end of the aisle, a lower shelf had intact cans—meat with rice, he guessed by weight and shape. One, two, then twenty. Beside them, sweet plums in syrup. He blinked. Not exactly survival food, but sugar was sugar.

"They must've been hidden behind something," he muttered. "Lucky rats."

He piled them in.

Then he noticed something beneath the main refrigerator unit, long defunct and rusted through. A glass neck poked out from the shadows. He reached down, scraping his knuckles on the metal edge, and tugged it free.

A beer bottle.

"Пиво," he read aloud. "Well, look at that."

He added it to the bag.

Behind the counter, a loaf of stone-hard bread sat in an open wrapper, gray and dry as bark. Still, boiled or soaked, it might give something back. He took it.

He turned, ready to leave, and his foot slipped on a puddle of old oil or rainwater or blood—who could say. He fell hard, head striking the edge of the shelf with a dull crack. Stars burst

behind his eyes. He grunted, rolled over. Blood ran slowly from his temple, creeping beneath the edge of the mask.

“Idiot...” he mumbled. “Damn floor’s trying to finish the job.”

He lay still for a moment, then reached into his coat and pulled out the old Geiger counter—Soviet army issue, olive green, its needle hidden behind scratched plastic. He flipped the switch and waited.

The needle twitched, then settled somewhere between 0.75 and 1.2 millisieverts per hour.

“High,” he whispered. “But not screaming. We’ll rot slower.”

He stood, breath wheezing inside the mask, and looked around once more. The dog hadn’t moved. Just watched him. He stared back.

“Still alive,” he said quietly. “Good for you.”

Then he turned and stepped out into the yellow air, the weight of his bag dragging at his shoulder, his breath misting the inside of the mask. Somewhere, far off, metal creaked like a voice that had forgotten how to speak.

Igor walked the road back with the bag slung over his shoulder, the weight of it swaying against his spine. The wind was sharper now, kicking up dust and flakes of charred debris. The air tasted of copper and old water. The road, churned into thick mud by the storm and rubble, clung to his boots with each step. His breath rasped louder in the mask.

Then, without warning, the edges of the world began to bend.

His vision blurred. The sky darkened strangely at the corners, like soot clouding glass. His legs faltered. A high-pitched tone, thin and unnatural, drilled into his ears. Then blood—warm and quick—began to run from his nostrils, dripping into the filter of the gas mask.

He dropped to his knees with a grunt. The flashlight tumbled into the mud.

Across the broken street, where a row of collapsed balconies leaned against each other like drunkards, a figure crouched in the wreckage.

Gray. Thin. Large black eyes. Head bulbous and smooth. Its limbs were wrong. Too long. It didn’t move, didn’t blink. Just crouched there, naked and silent, watching him.

Igor tried to speak, but no sound came. The air inside the mask grew thin. The pressure in his skull became a roar.

Then everything went dark.

Thirty minutes passed.

Igor stirred with a gasp, his hand clawing at the mud. His head throbbed, his body cold and drenched in sweat inside the suit. He sat up slowly, wincing. The sky above was the same jaundiced gray. The figure was gone.

He looked around, chest heaving. Nothing. No prints. No movement.

"What the hell was that?" he whispered, voice hoarse and thick. "A ghost? Hallucination? Radiation playing tricks?"

A cold shiver ran down his spine, and without another word he stood, shoulder aching, and quickened his pace toward the museum, slipping twice in the mud, almost falling again.

He entered through the same narrow break in the wall, climbed down the stone corridor, and descended the stair to the lower floor. His hands trembled as he unslung the bag and placed its contents into the refrigerator. He didn't speak. The Geiger counter remained unread.

Then, moving like a man sleepwalking, he went to the side room with the cot. He peeled off the rubber suit, one layer at a time, the air reeking of sweat and metal. The gas mask he placed back into the crate with care, as if it might explode.

He crawled into the blanket, teeth chattering despite the warmth, and closed his eyes. Sleep came not as rest, but as collapse.

Sergei awoke sometime later and moved slowly back to the archive room. The bulb still burned, weak but steady. The book lay where he had left it. He picked it up and settled into the chair, fingers cold, breath shallow. He turned the page.

"The earliest direct known life on Earth are stromatolite fossils which have been found in 3.480-billion-year-old geyserite uncovered in the Dresser Formation of the Pilbara Craton of Western Australia. Various microfossils of microorganisms have been found in 3.4 Ga rocks, including 3.465-billion-year-old Apex chert rocks from the same Australian craton region, and in 3.42 Ga hydrothermal vent precipitates from Barberton, South Africa. Much later in the geologic record, likely starting in 1.73 Ga, preserved molecular compounds of biologic origin are indicative of aerobic life. Therefore, the earliest time for the origin of life on Earth is at least 3.5 billion years ago and possibly as early as 4.1 billion years ago — not long after the oceans formed 4.5 billion years ago and after the formation of the Earth 4.54 billion years ago."

Sergei stared at the page for a long while. Then, slowly, his thoughts surfaced.

"Why life at all? Why should matter twist itself into shapes that eat and grow and think? What sparked that first breath beneath boiling rock and poison sea?"

He turned the page, but didn't read.

"And if the first were microbes... were they truly the first? Or only the first we found? A film in stone doesn't tell who laid the foundation."

He rubbed his temple.

"They say Homo sapiens are three hundred thousand years old. A flicker. A snap. And in that flicker, cities and bombs and death like thunder. What creature burns so brightly only to kill itself?"

His gaze dropped.

"Evolution, they claim. But where is the change? These microbes—they haven't changed in three billion years. Still they sit in rock like tiny kings. No speech, no cities, no ruin. Just survival. That is not evolution. That is stasis."

He looked toward the sealed door.

"Perhaps we were made. Brought here. Planted like seeds. Watched like mice. Maybe they meant to see what would bloom. And now they've seen enough."

His voice dropped to a whisper.

"Was this always the plan? Did someone write the end before the story began? Were we meant to destroy ourselves? Was it the point, not the failure?"

He touched the edge of the fossil book, as if it might respond.

"If the Earth is 4.5 billion years old, and we lasted less than a blink... then whose story is this really?"

The silence answered, as it always did. Only the dripping ceiling and the whisper of the past turning to dust.

In the side room near the boiler, the old velotrenajor stood where it always had—half bicycle, half absurd invention, its rusted frame bolted to the concrete floor. It had no wheels, only pedals and a crank that fed into a child's railway set, where a miniature locomotive waited on a circular track atop a metal table. Jelena mounted the bicycle without speaking, her face drawn and dry. She adjusted the rubber strap of the gas mask she'd hung on a hook nearby, then placed her feet on the pedals and began to cycle.

The machine creaked and groaned as it accepted her weight. With each turn of the pedals, the little train began to move, slowly at first, then smoother, as the dynamo beneath the table hummed and pushed the toy forward. The train circled the track—one, two, three times—its light flickering faintly. Jelena breathed heavily, her sweater darkening under the arms, the flower at the center of her chest blurring further into mud-colored obscurity.

Twenty minutes passed.

Sweat rolled down her spine, her breath came ragged. She climbed off the bike, wiped her forehead with a trembling hand, and made her way to the back chamber.

There, beneath a pipe-riddled ceiling, a metal tub had collected enough dripped water to be useful. The water was dark, flecked with rust and grit. She undressed slowly, the lesions on her arms and neck exposed in the dim light. Skin pale and marked. She stepped into the tub with a small wince at the cold, took the piece of green household soap—coarse, almost abrasive—and lathered her arms, chest, neck. The water stung slightly, the rust catching in every cut.

“It’s not washing,” she muttered. “Just pretending.”

When she was done, she dried with an old cloth and pulled her clothes back on. Her hair, wet and stringy, stuck to her cheek. She climbed the stairs, step by slow step, and emerged into the upper floor of the museum.

It was quiet.

The great hall, once polished and curated, now lay in a cracked stillness. Statues lined the walls like patient guards. Some had toppled, their faces broken in white shards on the floor. An Egyptian pharaoh, limestone chipped, stared eternally across the marble toward a Roman Augustus, whose nose had snapped off at the bridge, leaving his expression strangely blank. Jelena moved between them like a ghost.

She paused before the baby mammoth—stuffed, preserved, its fur dark with time and chemical treatment. It stood with one foot lifted, forever in the act of walking. Its glass eyes were dusty, but not dead. They watched her.

She stood before it, breathing.

"You're already gone," she thought. "You were born extinct, dragged from the ice just to be stared at. And now it's our turn."

She turned away and walked to the shattered glass case near the east wall. The display still held—miraculously—several ancient coins. She leaned in, reading the faded cards beneath them.

One bore the face of Alexander the Great, the eyes proud, the silver worn smooth by two thousand years. Another showed a Roman denarius of Trajan, the laurels still visible. A third—an Islamic dinar from the Abbasid Caliphate, gold thin as a petal, script elegant and sharp. A copper Kopek from Peter the Great’s reform years, green with age. A heavy Byzantine follis of Justinian, chipped at the edge. And a Chinese tangbao coin, square-holed, the characters still legible despite centuries of burial.

“History,” she thought. “No... we are to become one.”

The tears came slowly at first. Then faster. She tried to wipe them away, but her nose ran, her chest hitched, and soon she stood hunched, sobbing quietly. The sound of it echoed in the hall, soft and jagged. Her breath rasped as she slurped the mucus back into her throat.

Behind her, the mammoth remained. Silent. Watching.

She turned toward the shelf of busts. Generals, dozens of them. Marble faces frozen in grim determination. Kutuzov. Suvorov. Zhukov. Rokossovsky. Each stared down at her, their expressions heavy with victories long rendered irrelevant. Eyes of cold stone judging or remembering. She didn't know which.

She touched one of them, her fingers trembling against the polished cheek of a long-dead warlord.

"We built so much," she whispered. "And we burned it all. Statues and silence. Is this what memory feels like?"

Outside, beyond the fractured windows, the yellow mist still hung thick in the air. The sky had no shape. The wind carried nothing but dust and silence. Inside, the air was cool, moist. A mausoleum disguised as a museum.

She stood a while longer.

"Maybe it's not death that comes last," she thought. "Maybe it's forgetting. And we haven't forgotten yet."

Then she moved, quiet again, the last echoes of her sobs drifting into the stone.

Sergei turned another page, the brittle corner flaking beneath his finger, when the door creaked open and Neron stepped inside. His clothes were damp with sweat and condensation, boots caked in tunnel silt. Behind him, his daughter hovered uncertainly in the doorway. Her face was streaked with grime, and her hair clung to her forehead. Her jacket was half wet, sleeves too long, hanging like the limbs of something forgotten in rain.

Sergei looked up.

"You've been out long."

Neron nodded. "Went deeper into the west tunnels. The ones that bend toward the old military shaft."

Sergei closed the book halfway, kept his finger in the spine. "And?"

Neron glanced toward his daughter. She stepped into the room quietly, keeping close to the wall. Sergei gestured toward the crate by the lamp.

"Sit, little one. You're safe here."

She sat without a word.

Neron leaned against the table and exhaled. "I saw them. A small group. Maybe five, maybe six. Military. Couldn't see the insignia, if there were any. Rubber suits, gas masks. Each with a Kalashnikov, grenades on the belt."

Sergei reached into his coat and pulled a crumpled pack of *Prima* cigarettes. He struck a match against the table leg, lit the end, and puffed until the paper crackled and the tip glowed a steady red. The smoke curled above his head in the lamp's trembling light.

"Do they know about the museum?" he asked, watching the smoke drift. "Maybe they'll come here. Maybe there's some kind of news. Did you talk to them?"

Neron shook his head. "No. Didn't dare. They didn't look the type to ask questions before pulling a trigger. And I doubt they're looking for survivors. No one's looking anymore. Either everyone's dead... or dying."

Sergei puffed slowly, staring at the girl for a moment, then looked back at the page he had left open. He didn't read. "Yes," he said finally. "The human breed breaking the atom—ha. Considered the greatest achievement of science. Here we are now."

Neron scratched his temple, leaving a smear of dirt. "Still just apes, Sergei. Apes with circuits and satellites. We broke the atom, sure. But we didn't grow souls to match it. No morals. Just bigger teeth."

Sergei took another drag. "Breaking the atom wasn't the crime. It was never the science. It's the mind that wanted it for dominance. For fear. For hunger. It's not the tool—it's the hand that wields it. The hand of man has always itched to destroy what it doesn't understand."

Neron nodded. "A parasite, this species. Gnawing at the wood of the world until nothing's left but dust and hollow stumps. Trees, animals, oceans. Ourselves. There was never going to be any other outcome. We would've done this, sooner or later."

A rusty pipe in the corner let out a dry rattle, followed by two heavy drops of water that splashed into the tin bowl beside the boiler. Sergei leaned back and let the smoke slide from his lips. It rose gently, twisting like some lost spirit, then disappeared into the dark above the lamp.

"Progress," he said quietly. "That's what they called it. As if walking faster toward the cliff makes the fall more meaningful."

The girl sneezed softly. Both men looked toward her. She rubbed her nose with her sleeve, her eyes round and unblinking. She didn't understand the words—but she understood the silence beneath them.

Sergei offered her a faint smile, then looked back to Neron.

"Maybe they'll come," he said. "These soldiers. Maybe they'll bring orders, maps, hope. Maybe they'll bring bullets. I don't care much either way."

Neron crossed his arms. "If they bring orders, they'll be old ones. From a government that doesn't exist anymore."

Sergei chuckled, dryly. "They'll deliver protocol over our graves."

The girl shifted slightly. Her eyes darted to the broken clock on the wall.

“She doesn’t sleep well,” Neron murmured. “Keeps dreaming of people without faces. She says they knock on the doors and never speak.”

“She’s not wrong,” Sergei said. “The dead have questions we never answered.”

Neron stepped to the shelf and tapped one of the fossil books. “You still reading this stuff?”

“Every day,” Sergei replied. “The past is the only thing not trying to kill us.”

The girl finally spoke, her voice barely above a whisper. “Are there going to be... more people? Ever again?”

Neither man answered immediately.

Sergei took one last drag, stubbed the cigarette into a jar lid filled with ash, and looked into the lamp’s flickering light.

“We’re not extinct yet,” he said softly. “But history already turned the page.”

Neron sat down across from Sergei, his daughter asleep on the crate now, her small hands folded under her chin. The air in the room was thick with smoke and the smell of wet dust. Sergei watched the faint glow of another cigarette between his fingers, then glanced toward Neron, who leaned forward, elbows on his knees, eyes distant.

“I once read something,” Neron began, his voice low and steady. “Before all this. In a book I borrowed from the city library. It was about the Hopi—the old tribe in America, the ones who live out in the desert. They had their own stories about how the world ends and begins again.”

Sergei nodded slightly. “I’ve heard of them. The ones who spoke of the worlds before ours.”

“Yes,” Neron said. “They said the world we live in now is the Fourth. Before this one, there were three others. Each was destroyed when people stopped living in balance with what they called the Creator’s way. The first world burned, the second froze, the third drowned. Fire, ice, and flood. And each time, the few who still kept the old ways were led to safety to start again.”

He paused, his eyes fixed on the faint light trembling above the table. “The Hopi said that when the Fourth World nears its end, there will be signs. Not small ones—cosmic ones. Stars changing color, comets appearing in the heavens. They spoke of a blue star, the Saquasohuh. The Blue Star Kachina. Its arrival would be the ninth and final sign before the world is cleansed. They said when the Blue Star dances in the heavens, that’s when the great purification begins.”

He rubbed his hands together slowly, his palms gray with tunnel dust. “After that comes the Red Star—the Red Purifier. They said it would come close to the Earth, so close it would seem to watch humanity. The sky would turn red, the air would burn. They called it the Red

Dawn, when blood and fire would cover the land. Some thought it meant a comet, others said it was a spirit, or a star that moves with intent.”

Sergei leaned back, smoke trailing from his mouth, eyes narrow with thought.

“The Hopi didn’t see it as the end,” Neron continued. “Not in the way we think of endings. They believed it was just another cleansing. A transition into what they called the Fifth World. They said the Fourth World would die because people forgot their place, forgot gratitude, lost balance with the earth. The Fifth would come after, pure again, for those who had peace in their hearts. They called it the World of Illumination.”

He gave a faint, humorless smile. “And they said the wars, the fires, the destruction—all that would depend on how far people had gone from the sacred way. The more we forgot, the worse it would be. Some even spoke of a great war, not just of weapons, but of the spirit—a war between material greed and what they called the truth of the soul.”

He looked down at his hands. “I used to think it was just myth. A story from the other side of the world. But look around us. Maybe we reached that point after all.”

Sergei watched him quietly, the cigarette burning low between his fingers.

“They said the sky would turn red,” Neron said softly, “and that’s what happened, didn’t it? The fires, the dust, the clouds glowing like blood. Maybe the Blue Star and the Red Purifier weren’t stars at all. Maybe it was us. We made our own comets fall.”

He leaned back and sighed, his gaze turning toward the sleeping child. “The Hopi never said where the end would come from. They only said it would come. And maybe they knew, even then, that it wouldn’t matter. Whether it was from the sky or from the hand of man—the result would be the same.”

Sergei stubbed out the cigarette in the metal lid, eyes thoughtful. “So the prophecy was fulfilled,” he murmured. “Just not the way they imagined.”

Neron nodded slowly. “No. The purification didn’t come from above. It came from within. We brought the Red Dawn ourselves.”

The lamp flickered, casting long shadows across the room. For a moment neither spoke. The sound of dripping water echoed faintly through the corridor. Then Sergei said quietly, “Perhaps the Fifth World is already here. Only none of us are pure enough to see it.”

Neron looked up at him, weary but calm. “Or maybe it’s waiting for the last of us to vanish, so it can finally begin.”

The two men sat in silence. The girl turned in her sleep. Outside, the wind shifted, carrying with it the faint metallic taste of a world long overdue for renewal.

Sergei leaned forward in his chair, arms resting on his knees, the faint glow of the lamp casting long shadows behind him. He looked down at the floor, then toward the shelf where a small bust of Stalin stood half-hidden behind a pile of dust-covered books.

“I don’t believe in a Fifth World,” he said, the words heavy and flat. “Not with humans in it. Everyone’s gone. Those who are left... they’re dying slow. Radiation eats at the inside. It’s not rebirth—it’s rot. We’re not crossing into a new age, we’re just waiting to fall like flies. One by one. No trumpet, no prophecy. Just silence.”

He stared at the bust for a long moment.

“It’s good, though,” he added. “That at least Stalin’s order ended. His shadow doesn’t reach into these ruins. His towers fell like the rest. But still,” Sergei’s voice softened, “I bless Lenin... and Marx too. Whatever came after twisted things, but the thought itself was honest. A world built for the worker. That idea, at least, was beautiful.”

Neron, sitting across from him, nodded. “No more state,” he said. “No more quotas. No more five-year plans. No more borders. Just hunger and ash. And that’s strangely... freeing.”

They sat quietly. The lamp buzzed softly, and far off in the tunnels, a faint metallic sound echoed—a rhythmic clank, too measured to be a falling pipe. Sergei stiffened. Neron looked up sharply.

“You hear that?”

“Yes,” Sergei said, already standing. “Steps. On the lower ladder.”

Neron grabbed the pipe he kept leaned against the wall and stood by the door, eyes alert. “Might be the soldiers. The ones I saw near the military shaft.”

Sergei stepped into the corridor beside him, and they waited, breath held. The sound grew louder—boots on steel. A scrape. Then the creak of a heavy door opening. Three figures emerged, dark shapes in rubber suits, gas masks on, rifles raised and glinting under their mounted flashlights. One had grenades hanging from his belt like dead fruit.

Sergei lifted a hand instinctively. Neron held his ground, silent.

One soldier stepped forward, rifle up, and spoke through his gas mask. The voice came out muffled, mechanical—no words distinguishable.

Sergei squinted. “What?”

Neron gestured firmly. “Take off the mask. We can’t understand.”

The soldier paused, then reached up and unclasped the mask with a hiss of stale air. He pulled it free, revealing a gaunt, weather-burned face. His eyes were sharp, sunken. His breath steamed in the cool air.

“Captain Ivan Ivanovich Kapustylin,” he said. “We’re from a base nearby. How many souls alive in this building?”

Sergei looked at him for a long moment. “Five. That’s all. A bit of food. Not enough to share.”

Ivan nodded grimly, then reached into a canvas shoulder bag. He pulled out three dented cans and handed them over—labels half-torn, but clearly tomatoes.

“Take these,” he said. “We don’t have much either. Don’t know if there’s even a point in keeping these bodies alive anymore.”

Sergei accepted the cans silently. Neron shifted his weight but said nothing.

Ivan looked around the corridor. “We’re moving out soon. The base is dead. No comms, no fuel. Just cold walls and canned air. A chopper’s coming to pick us up before we starve. There’s still one base to the north. More stable. Some supplies. A few of us left—men, a few women. Enough to say life goes on. Barely.”

Neron finally spoke. “Why come here then?”

“We were checking for survivors,” Ivan said. “Didn’t expect much. The tunnels map’s old, but it still shows this wing.”

Sergei tilted his head. “And after the north?”

Ivan’s mouth tightened. “We wait. Maybe something comes from beyond. Maybe not. But we’ll wait.”

He put his mask back on, adjusting the straps with practiced fingers. His two companions hadn’t spoken at all. They stood watchfully, rifles steady.

Ivan glanced at the girl sleeping inside the room behind them. “She yours?”

Neron nodded.

Ivan’s voice came quieter through the mask now. “Keep her safe. As long as you can.”

Without another word, the three soldiers turned and disappeared into the darkness, boots echoing as they descended back into the earth.

Sergei stood there, watching the shadow of them shrink into the black.

“They’re going north,” he said after a pause.

“They won’t find anything there,” Neron replied. “But they’ll die looking.”

Sergei looked at the cans in his hand. “Better than dying standing still.”

Then he turned and went back inside, the sound of his steps soft against the cold stone.

The Museum

Sergei stood by the cot where Igor lay, shaking his shoulder gently until the younger man stirred. The air was heavy with the smell of rubber, dust, and human sweat.

“Igor,” Sergei said quietly. “Wake up.”

Igor blinked and rubbed his eyes, his face drawn and pale. “What is it?”

“Military men came earlier,” Sergei said. “Said there’s still food in their base through the tunnels. They’re leaving, so whatever is left will rot if we don’t take it. Come with me. We can bring some back before the rest of it disappears.”

Igor sat up immediately. Hunger was the one argument that needed no persuasion. He swung his legs off the cot and reached for the rubber suit hanging from the wall hook. The material clung cold and stiff to his hands. He pulled it on in silence, then strapped the gas mask over his face, tightening the straps at the back of his head. Sergei did the same, slipping the cracked mask on, the glass lenses fogging briefly with his breath.

“Bring the green bag,” Sergei said. “We’ll need both.”

They made their way down the hall to the ladder that led to the tunnels. The metal rungs were slick with condensation. Their boots clanged against the steps, echoes disappearing into the deep belly of the earth.

At the bottom, the tunnel stretched before them—low and damp, the ceiling lined with dim bulbs that flickered like dying insects. Igor switched on his flashlight, the beam slicing through the fog.

“Feels like we’re walking through the veins of a corpse,” he muttered, voice muffled through the mask.

Sergei grunted softly. “At least this corpse still has food somewhere in it.”

They walked for a long time, the tunnel bending and splitting, pipes humming faintly along the walls. Occasionally a droplet fell from above, shattering against the floor.

“You think the soldiers left anything decent?” Igor asked.

“Doubt they’d lie,” Sergei replied. “They said they couldn’t carry everything. Maybe we’ll find what’s left of their stores—some canned meat, maybe bread.”

“Bread,” Igor said, almost smiling beneath the mask. “Wouldn’t that be something.”

Soon the faint hum of machinery grew louder. A metallic thrum echoed through the tunnel. Then, distantly, came the heavy whine of rotor blades—muted, but unmistakable. They stopped and listened.

“That’s the helicopter,” Sergei said. “They’re leaving.”

The sound faded, growing thinner until only the tunnel’s breathing remained. They moved forward, and after a few turns, the tunnel opened into a steel hatch leading into the base. The air was colder, filled with the sterile tang of metal and chemical disinfectant.

They found the first room easily—a medical station. A few ceiling lights still worked, buzzing weakly. Metal trays lined the counters, some overturned. Syringes glinted faintly, bandages yellowed with age. Cups held scattered pills.

Sergei picked one up and squinted at the label. “Painkillers. And here—anti-inflammatories.”

“Better than nothing,” Igor said, stuffing a few into his bag.

They moved on through the dark corridor until they reached the dining hall. The door was rusted and ajar. Inside, the flashlight beam cut across long tables and fallen chairs. The place smelled of old grease and cold iron.

“There,” Sergei said, pointing to the back where large metal freezers lined the wall. He tugged one open. Cold mist drifted out. Inside were rows of cans stacked neatly, labels faded but legible.

“Meat with rice. Tomatoes. Fish,” Sergei read aloud. “And look—frozen calf legs. Must’ve been from their last stock.”

They filled their bags until they could carry no more. Sergei tied his shut with an old rope. “We can’t fit it all into our freezer,” he said. “I’ll take one sack now, bring it to the museum, then return for the rest. You stay here, keep watch. Don’t wander.”

Igor nodded. “Alright. I’ll wait in the kitchen.”

Sergei hoisted the bag over his shoulder and disappeared into the tunnel, the sound of his boots fading until only the low hum of the base remained.

Igor sat in the kitchen near the wall, the flashlight resting beside him, its beam cutting a pale circle across the floor. The silence was immense. Even the pipes seemed to hold their breath.

He felt a pulse of pain behind his eyes—a sudden, sharp throb that made him wince. He reached into his bag, found one of the cups from the medical room, shook out two tablets, and swallowed them dry. The bitterness clung to his tongue.

He leaned back, closing his eyes for a moment.

Suddenly he heard a sound, that same high-pitched tone, piercing and thin, threading into his skull.

His eyes flew open. He grabbed the flashlight, swinging it toward the door. The beam trembled in his hand.

Something moved in the dark beyond the threshold.

A shape. Small at first, then clearer as it came into the light—a crouching figure. Skin gray and smooth. Head large, eyes wide and dark as oil. Limbs thin, jointed wrong. It didn't move. It just watched him.

Igor froze. His breath rasped inside the mask. His heart hammered. The tone in his head grew louder, a shriek of pressure that made him press both hands against his skull.

"What... what are you?" he whispered hoarsely.

The creature didn't answer. It only tilted its head slightly, the motion slow and deliberate, as though studying him.

Blood began to trickle from Igor's nose, sliding down under the mask. He trembled, eyes wide with fear.

The noise intensified, filling the room with a sound only he could hear.

"Stop," he gasped. "Please stop."

He looked down for a second, trying to steady his breath, hands gripping the table's edge. When he looked up again, the doorway was empty.

The tone ceased instantly.

Silence returned, deep and absolute. The beam of the flashlight quivered against the rusted door.

Igor's breathing came fast and ragged. "It's in my head," he muttered. "It's not real. Just radiation. Hallucinations. That's all."

He wiped at his nose with his sleeve, smearing the blood.

Then he sat there for a long while, not moving, afraid to look toward the door again, waiting for Sergei's steps to echo down the corridor and remind him that something human was still left in the world.

The sound of boots on concrete echoed softly in the tunnel before Sergei reappeared, the empty bag slung over his shoulder. His breath fogged in the stale air. Igor stood from the metal chair and straightened his back, but his eyes darted once toward the dining hall door.

"You ready?" Sergei asked, glancing around.

Igor nodded. "Yes. Let's finish this before the cold sets into our bones."

He didn't mention the creature. Not a word about the tone or the blood. It was better that way. A dream, maybe. A ghost conjured by radiation and nerves. It didn't matter now.

They moved quickly, refilling the bag with cans—meat with potatoes, plums in syrup, tinned bread, fish in oil. Sergei hoisted the frozen calf leg over his shoulder. It smelled faintly of freezer burn and old blood.

In one of the side rooms, Igor rummaged through a wooden locker and pulled out a set of army fatigues—warm, unworn, still stiff. He folded them under his arm.

“Take that,” Sergei said. “And the sheets, too. We can trade if it ever comes to that.”

They gathered a pillow, a few towels, and rolled the bundle tight. The flashlight flickered as they passed back through the corridor, and Igor couldn’t help glancing at every turn, every intersection. Dark side halls branched away from the main tunnel, leading to unknown depths. Shadows pooled in the corners like liquid night.

He felt it again—that sick sensation rising from the pit of his stomach. A pressure in the spine. He couldn’t shake the thought that the creature might be watching.

But the shadows stayed shadows. The silence remained.

They reached the ladder. Sergei climbed first, grunting with effort, then Igor followed, dragging the sack up behind him. The museum welcomed them with its damp, moldy air.

Back in the kitchen, they unloaded their haul. The refrigerator door creaked as it opened. Sergei stacked the cans with care, placing the meat toward the back, the tomatoes on the lower shelf. The calf’s leg, wrapped in plastic, was stuffed into the metal drawer below.

Igor leaned against the wall, pale beneath the mask.

“You alright?” Sergei asked, watching him.

Igor nodded slowly. “Just tired. Too many steps. Air down there doesn’t feel right.”

“Go lie down.”

“I will.”

Igor walked to his cot, collapsed into the blankets, and pulled them over his shoulders without another word. The dull throb in his skull was returning. A strange buzzing in his bones.

Sergei stood a moment longer, then left the kitchen and returned to his room. He lit the bulb, picked up his fossil book again, and sat down, flipping back to the page with stromatolites. Life, frozen in stone. Still more alive than the present.

In the kitchen, a few minutes later, Jelena entered quietly. Her sweater hung from her like wet cloth, and her eyes had darkened in the hollows.

She approached the shelf where the soldiers had left the medicine cups. There were old Soviet blister packs: *Analgin*, *Tsitramon*, *Validol*, *Corvalol*, even a box of *No-Spa*, crumpled and stained. She turned each over slowly, not knowing what she was looking for.

Then she found it—a small glass vial, capped with a black rubber cork. The faded label read *Йод*, iodine.

She pulled the cork loose. A sharp smell rose up—metallic, chemical. She took a sip. Just a little. The bitterness stung her tongue, burned faintly down her throat.

She stood still for a long time, holding the vial, then touched the lesions on her neck, her wrists, her arms. They had darkened. Hardened around the edges.

“I won’t last,” she whispered. “Not like this.”

Her voice broke. Her knees weakened. She slid down beside the shelf, her back to the cold wall. The vial clinked softly against the floor.

Tears welled and fell.

“What’s the point?” she thought. “There’s nothing left. The sky is poison. The soil is ash. Even the air makes us bleed from the inside. Who would want to keep crawling through this?”

She sniffed, wiping her nose with the edge of her sleeve.

“Why not just go now?” she thought. “What’s left to witness?”

Her shoulders trembled. The tears came faster.

“Maybe dying would be peace. Maybe it would be like sleep. The world is ending anyway, one breath at a time. What difference does one less make?”

Suddenly, a hand touched her shoulder.

She flinched, startled, turning sharply—only to find Neron’s daughter standing there. The child’s face was blank, unreadable, eyes large and round.

Jelena blinked at her. The tears still fell, but her sobs slowed. She sniffed again, wiping her face.

“Sorry,” she whispered.

The girl didn’t speak. She just stood there with her hand on Jelena’s shoulder. Solid. Warm.

Jelena reached up and placed her hand gently over the girl’s.

The kitchen went quiet again. Only the buzz of the refrigerator and the soft clink of cans settling. The vial lay where it had rolled, unopened now.

And outside the cracked windows, the yellow mist pressed against the glass, unmoving.

Sergei sat behind the table, elbows resting on its uneven surface, his thin fingers curled around the soft spine of the thick book. The lamp above him swayed slightly from the draft creeping under the door, its weak glow tracing shadows on the stacks of yellowed pages that surrounded him like decaying monuments.

He turned a page, the rustle dry and brittle. The new chapter began: *Fossils have been found preserving incredibly specific, dramatic moments in time. One famous example is a Velociraptor and a Protoceratops locked in combat, likely buried instantly by a collapsing sand dune. Another fossil shows a fish that choked to death while trying to swallow an ammonite (an ancient marine mollusk).*

Sergei leaned back, the words echoing in his mind.

“Tragedy fossilized,” he thought. “This is the nature of the world. You live... and suddenly you don’t anymore.”

His eyes remained on the page, but they no longer read.

“What is human life compared to the age of the planet? We’ve existed a blink of an eye. And we’re already gone. Dust on the breeze. Ninety-nine point nine percent of all species have died out. That is the law of this world. It isn’t cruelty. It’s rhythm. We just didn’t want to listen to it.”

He exhaled slowly, watching the smoke from his lips rise and mingle with the ceiling’s damp air.

“Yet we—the human breed—we imagined ourselves above all that. Masters of the earth. We climbed onto our two legs and thought we were gods. We invented gods to mirror ourselves. Set ourselves apart from the animals. Called ourselves chosen. But we’re nothing. Just an accident of nature. A brief flicker of material existence. No more.”

He looked over to the busted glass case near the wall, where the broken pieces of time still sat—coins, bones, statues of generals and kings who ruled over dust.

“And if it comes down to survival,” he thought, “then what did we do? We poisoned the air, the rivers, the soil. We wiped out forests, species, even ourselves. The animals—those we called lesser—at least knew how to live. We never did. So what does that make us?”

He frowned.

“We are lower than them. Dumber. Because we mistook destruction for strength, and noise for knowledge.”

His eyes fell on a curled photo of a forest—green and alive—from a museum display, faded from time and light.

“I respect the animals,” he thought. “They are not violent. Except a few—only the predators, and even they take what they need. No more. No greed. No hunger to burn the whole world to stay warm for one more winter. They don’t tear their world apart. They don’t build bombs. They don’t split atoms or torture their own kind.”

The sound of water dripping into the tin bowl near the pipe filled the silence.

“They don’t bother with the atom. They don’t feel the need to question the sun or measure the distance to the stars. They don’t invent science just to twist it into weapons. That’s what we do. That’s how we showed the depth of our misunderstanding—our sickness.”

He closed the book gently and stared at it a while. The past was printed in its pages, sealed in stone and bones. The present was rot. The future—if any—belonged to no one.

Outside the sealed doors, the yellow mist still hung in silence.

Dimming Flame

Igor moved slowly through the upper floor of the museum, one hand dragging along the cracked railing as if it were the only thing keeping him upright. His breathing came in shallow, uneven bursts behind the mask, fogging the glass in weak pulses. Beneath the rubber suit, his skin burned. The ulcers on his chest had spread in irregular patches, rough at the edges, weeping through the cloth. Every step made them throb. Each movement felt like something tearing loose somewhere inside him.

He paused near the hall of mammals, where broken display lights hung like dead fruit from the ceiling. The yellow air seeped in through the shattered skylight, pooling on the floor in pale mist. He lifted his mask for a moment, desperate for a breath that didn’t taste of rubber. The air stung his throat instantly, sharp as metal. He put the mask back on, trembling.

He wandered without aim, brushing past the toppled skeleton of a cave bear, its ribcage collapsed inward. His boots scraped through dust and bits of plaster. He steadied himself against a wall, leaving a smear of blood from his hand. His eyes blurred. The hallway stretched too far, the shadows too deep.

Then, near the corner where a Roman mosaic had fallen from the wall, he saw it again.

A gray form, crouched low, head bowed, eyes enormous and dark. The shape flickered at the edge of his sight like heat above a furnace. Igor blinked hard, gripping the wall.

“I’m not dying yet,” he muttered to himself, as if speaking the words could anchor him. “Not yet.”

The figure didn’t move. It only watched him, the outline wavering like smoke. Igor’s chest tightened. His legs buckled for an instant before he caught himself. When he looked again, the thing was gone. Only the mosaic shards lay there, shining faintly under the weak lamp.

He pressed a hand to his forehead. The skin there felt hot, pulsing. He walked on, though each step dragged. The corridor swayed. Displays leaned toward him like tired giants. The glass eyes of stuffed animals glinted with a strange dampness, as if the ruin had seeped into them.

He stopped in front of the mammoth calf again—the same spot where they had placed Igor’s earlier findings, the same place where silence felt heavier than the dust. The creature’s glassy gaze seemed to meet his.

“I saw something,” he whispered behind the mask. “Or I didn’t. I don’t know anymore.”

A wave of cold moved through him, starting at the back of his neck and settling into his bones. He wiped his nose and saw blood smear across his fingertips.

His breath rasped louder. The air shifted. And for a moment—only a moment—he felt the presence behind him.

When he turned, nothing waited in the hall but the long dead, and the yellow mist pressing at the broken windows, drifting like an old memory through the ruined world.

Jelena found Sergei in the small reading room again, sitting at the wooden table with the lamp trembling above him. The book lay open, but he wasn’t reading. His hands were clasped loosely on the page, and his eyes drifted somewhere far past the paper. The air smelled of damp plaster and the last smoke of a cigarette.

She stepped inside quietly and sat across from him, her movements slow, as though her bones were turning to stone. The lesions on her neck had darkened overnight, thin cracks branching from them like veins of rust.

Sergei looked up, offering a faint nod. “You couldn’t sleep.”

“No,” she said. “Too many thoughts.”

He closed the book gently. “Thoughts are all we have left. Everything else is falling apart.”

She folded her hands on the table, staring at the cracks in her knuckles. “Do you think we’ll be remembered?”

Sergei breathed in slowly. “By whom?”

“Anyone,” she said. “Anything.”

He glanced toward the fossils on the nearby shelf. “Memory is strange. Some creatures lived millions of years, eaten, crushed, forgotten. But a single tooth or bone ends up in rock, and suddenly they’re remembered longer than all our cities. Maybe remembrance isn’t about being important. Maybe it’s just... what the earth decides to keep.”

Jelena lowered her eyes. “I don’t want to disappear completely. Even animals leave footprints. We... we leave nothing now.”

Sergei was quiet a moment. “You’ll leave something. Even if it’s only the echo of a voice in this room. Even if it’s just a name in a page.”

She gave a weak smile, though her eyes stayed dull. “I used to think that too. Before.”

He waited, sensing something pushed down beneath her words.

“I had a child once,” she finally said. “A son. Barely lived a month.” Her voice trembled but didn’t break. “Born small. Too small. I did everything I could, but... he wasn’t strong enough for this world.”

Sergei nodded slowly, his own chest tightening. “I’m sorry.”

“There wasn’t even a grave,” she whispered. “Hospital took care of it. They told me not to worry. That he didn’t know anything yet. Didn’t feel anything yet.” She shook her head. “But I remember his fingers. They were so tiny. He held on to mine like he didn’t want to let go.”

Sergei placed his hand on the table, not touching hers, but close enough that the warmth reached across the space between them. “Then he is remembered. Through you. Through the fact that you sit here now and still carry him.”

Jelena wiped her cheek with the back of her hand. “I’m afraid that when I die, he’ll die again. That it will be like he never existed at all.”

Sergei looked toward the ceiling, listening to the faint echo of dripping water. “Everything disappears. But disappearances aren’t the same as being unremembered. Something stays. Even if nobody speaks the name. Even if nobody writes it. Memory doesn’t only live in minds. Sometimes it lives in the quiet. In the places where people once stood.”

A long silence sat between them.

Jelena looked up at him. “Do you believe that?”

He nodded. “Yes. I have to.”

She breathed out slowly, the sound thin and tired. “Then maybe... maybe that’s enough.”

Sergei turned the page of his book without reading it. The lamplight flickered. The room felt smaller, as if holding its breath around them.

Outside, the yellow mist pressed against the broken windows, waiting.

Neron climbed the narrow stairwell that wound toward the museum roof, each step coated in dust and broken fragments of concrete. The rail had snapped away long ago, leaving only bent metal nubs along the wall. He kept one hand against the cold surface as he ascended, breath echoing up the hollow shaft. The air thinned near the top, carrying the smell of scorched stone and the faint sting of radiation that seeped through every crack left by the blast.

The final door had half-fallen from its hinges. He pushed it aside with his shoulder and stepped out onto what remained of the roof.

Wind met him immediately—dry, sour, carrying ash like drifting snow. He narrowed his eyes. The world beyond the museum stretched in every direction as a graveyard of shapes.

Buildings lay flattened or peeled open like giant metal flowers. Streets were no longer streets but long veins of rubble. Cars sat twisted into grotesque forms, some piled upon each other like animals that had died trying to climb free.

Far away, the sky cracked red where clouds thinned. The color bled into the horizon, tinting the crumbled city in a surreal glow. The sun was little more than a smudge caught behind layers of smoke. Nothing moved. Not a bird. Not a breeze strong enough to lift dust from the ruins. Only the low hum of distant wind passing through hollow structures.

Neron walked toward the broken parapet. Each step sent pebbles skittering over the edge. He stood at the rim, his boots half over the line where floor became open air. Below him lay the museum façade—columns cracked down the middle, statues half buried in debris, windows blackened like empty eyes.

He looked out over the wasteland and felt an emptiness settle inside him, deeper than hunger, deeper than grief. The kind that comes when the future closes its doors.

“If I step forward,” he thought, “there’s nothing to stop me. Just a fall. A few seconds. No more tunnels, no more sickness, no more waiting to rot like the ruins around me.”

The idea lingered, heavy and still. His fingers curled around the crumbling stone.

“Everyone dies anyway. Days, weeks, maybe months. One by one. It would be cleaner to go now. Cleaner than bleeding from the inside like the others. Cleaner than watching my daughter fade, then following her.”

He closed his eyes. The wind brushed his face, thin as breath, carrying with it the faint scent of burnt wire.

For a moment he leaned forward—not enough to fall, but enough for the world to tilt. His heart thudded once, then again.

But under the wind, he heard something. A faint echo from below. A child’s cough, soft and strained. His daughter. The sound drifted up the stairwell like a fragile thread.

His hand tightened on the edge of the parapet.

He stepped back.

The ash swirled lightly around him, whispering against his suit. He looked once more at the red horizon, then turned away, descending slowly into the darkness of the stairwell, carrying the weight of a decision no one would ever know he made.

Igor stumbled through the corridor leading from the upper floors, one hand pressed against his ribs, the other dragging along the damp wall. His breath rattled unevenly behind the mask, each inhale thinner than the last. The ulcers on his arms had split open, leaving streaks of dark fluid along his sleeves. His legs trembled beneath him, refusing to obey. The corridor swayed in his vision, the lamps above flickering in long, wavering lines.

He paused near the staircase, gripping the railing with whitening fingers. The world dipped. His knees buckled. He slid down the wall, landing hard on the cold floor. The mask fogged in rapid bursts, then in panicked gasps. His hands clawed weakly at the air, as if trying to grasp something that wasn't there.

A deep tremor passed through his body, then another. His back arched. His heels hammered against the floor. He let out a low groan that rose into a strangled cry, muffled behind the rubber. The sound traveled down the hallway, thin and helpless, swallowed by the emptiness of the museum.

Neron heard it first and ran toward him, boots pounding. Jelena arrived moments later, breath shallow, one hand pressed to her chest. Sergei came last, moving as quickly as his age allowed, the fossil book still in his hand as if he had forgotten to put it down.

Igor convulsed again. His fingers curled inward. His head thrashed once against the floor. The suffocating mask made his breath stutter in dull, wet sounds. Neron knelt and tried to lift his shoulders, but Igor's body jerked violently, slipping from his grasp.

"Hold him," Neron said, though there was nothing to hold anymore. The strength had already gone from Igor's limbs. His breathing thinned to a faint hitching sound. His spine relaxed slowly, the tension draining out of him like water from a cracked cup. The tremors stopped.

A quiet sigh escaped his lips.

His chest rose once more, shallow and weak, then stilled.

Jelena pressed a hand to her mouth. Sergei lowered his eyes. Neron pulled back the mask from Igor's face and closed the young man's open eyes with two fingers. The pupils were clouded, staring at something far beyond any of them.

They said nothing. Words had lost their meaning.

Later, when the lamp shadows had shifted and the cold grew sharper in the corridors, they wrapped Igor's body in sheets torn from the military find. The fabric was thin, smelling faintly of dust and old detergent. They tied the ends over his feet and head, making the form neat and small, as if preparing a child for sleep.

Together they carried him to the hall of extinct mammals. The mammoth calf stood in its eternal pose, frozen mid-step, its glass eyes reflecting the faint light. They set Igor down near its feet, laying the wrapped body gently against the base of the display.

Sergei placed one hand on the mammoth's fur, coarse beneath the dust. For a moment it seemed the creature watched over Igor, guardian of a world long gone, recognizing in him another vanished form.

No one spoke. The air was cold and still. They stood there a while, then turned away one by one, leaving Igor in the silent company of the ancient dead.

Sergei sat alone at the table long after the others had drifted back to their rooms. The lamp above him flickered softly, its thin circle of light touching only the papers spread before him. He held a pencil between his fingers, the wood worn smooth from years of use, its tip trembling slightly as he pressed it to a scrap of pale paper torn from an old notebook.

He wrote slowly, shaping each letter with care, as though precision could soften the weight behind them.

Igor

Just the name. Nothing more. No dates. No explanations. The world had no need for those anymore.

He stared at the word for a while. The letters seemed too small, too fragile to contain the whole of a life—the voice, the fear, the trembling hands, the long walks through the tunnels. Yet it was all he had to give. All anyone could give.

He picked up one of the museum's books from the pile at the edge of the table—a thick volume about Pleistocene mammals, its spine cracked, its corners rounded from countless hands that once turned its pages in calmer, brighter days. He opened it somewhere near the middle, where the section about cave lions had begun to curl at the edges.

He slipped the tiny paper between two pages and closed the book gently, pressing his palm to the cover as if sealing a secret within.

“Now at least one page will remember,” he said quietly, almost a whisper.

The lamp cast his shadow across the stacks of artifacts and broken displays, stretching it thin against the wall. Outside the faint, distant wind scraped along the ruins, but inside the room, everything was still.

He placed the book back on the shelf. The spine leaned slightly to the left, imperfect and alone among the others, yet present—holding its name, holding its memory.

Sergei stood there for a long moment, hand resting on the book's cover, as though feeling the weight of the life now pressed into its pages. Then he turned away and walked slowly into the dimness of the corridor, leaving behind the soft rustle of paper settling into silence.

The Weight of Time

Jelena sat hunched over a low wooden table in the numismatics room, where the broken glass of display cases had long since been swept into corners and the labels curled unreadable with damp. The coins lay in shallow boxes—ancient Roman denarii, copper kopeks, Byzantine solidi—most green with age, some faded to a dull gray sheen. Fossil shards were piled beside them, fragments of trilobites and plant imprints in stone, scattered like fallen leaves.

Her fingers trembled as she tried to sort them. A coin slipped and rolled across the table, hitting the floor with a soft ring. She blinked after it, confused for a moment, then turned to Sergei, who sat beside her, watching without speaking.

“I... I dropped the...” she said, then stopped. Her brow furrowed.

“The coin,” Sergei said gently.

“Yes,” she nodded, but her voice was thick. “The coin. Yes.”

She reached for another but fumbled, her grip weak. Her hands bore a new pattern of brown lesions across the backs, where the skin had begun to split. Her lips had cracked in the corners, and when she tried to speak again, the words came out slow, muddled.

“This one... it’s... from...” she paused, staring at the faint markings on a thick bronze coin.

“Catherine,” Sergei said, pointing. “Catherine the Great. See the crowned eagle.”

She nodded again, her eyes dull, not quite focusing. “Yes. Eagle. Yes.”

Sergei gently pushed a fossil toward her—a small leaf imprint in shale. “Try sorting these. Left for plants, right for creatures.”

She stared at the stone for a long time before taking it. Her fingers felt stiff, clumsy. “They’re all... old,” she mumbled. “Older than us. Even... even you.”

Sergei smiled faintly. “Much older than me. This one here,” he held up a curled ammonite, “has been dead since before the first trees.”

Jelena didn’t laugh. She looked at it with a quiet sort of reverence, as though it might whisper something if she listened close enough.

“I can’t remember... some things,” she said suddenly. “Words, faces... I see a man in my sleep, I think he’s my brother, or maybe my... my...” Her voice faltered. She stared at the ammonite again.

Sergei reached over and steadied her hand. “It’s alright. Memory thins, but it doesn’t vanish. It just sinks a little deeper.”

She looked at him, eyes wet but unfocused. “Is that true?”

“I want it to be.”

She nodded slowly, eyes returning to the table. The coins and fossils shimmered dully in the lamplight. She reached for one of the coins again, held it close, and whispered, almost inaudibly, “Time doesn’t stop, does it?”

“No,” Sergei said, watching her. “But we can still sit with it while it passes.”

Outside, the yellow mist moved like breath against the broken windows. The museum walls creaked softly, as if remembering too.

Sergei sat by the flickering bulb, the fossil book open before him like an altar, its yellowing pages spread with diagrams of ancient life and the scars of their vanishing. The air was heavy in the room, thick with moisture and silence. Jelena lay nearby on a mattress of bundled coats, her eyes half closed, listening. She had stopped sorting the coins—her hands no longer steady—and now only listened when Sergei read.

He cleared his throat gently and began, voice steady, thin, like an old string instrument still holding pitch.

“The Permian–Triassic extinction event... the Great Dying,” he read. “Two hundred fifty-two million years ago. Up to ninety-six percent of marine species, seventy percent of land vertebrates, and most insect families perished. The cause—massive volcanic eruptions in the Siberian Traps, releasing greenhouse gases, poisoning the oceans, suffocating the skies.”

He paused and looked toward Jelena. Her breath was slow, her gaze distant.

He turned the page and continued.

“Later, the Cretaceous–Paleogene extinction event. Sixty-six million years ago. An asteroid, ten kilometers wide, struck near what is now the Yucatán Peninsula. Shockwaves circled the planet. Tsunamis swept across the coasts. The atmosphere darkened. Temperatures dropped. Firestorms raged. Dinosaurs vanished.”

He placed a hand gently on the corner of the page, tracing the illustration of impact waves spiraling across a primitive map.

“A wave of heat followed by years of cold,” he said. “And then, only the bones.”

Jelena murmured faintly, not words, just a sound.

He kept reading. “The ash covered the Earth. Photosynthesis ceased. Food chains collapsed. The planet required millions of years to recover. And from those empty spaces, mammals rose.”

Sergei exhaled slowly, letting the page fall still. “This world has a memory of destruction. The Earth doesn’t end—it forgets.”

Jelena’s eyes shifted toward him. “Why do you read this?”

“To remember how small we are,” he said. “And how much we’ve repeated.”

Outside, the yellow mist clung to the windows like dust on forgotten glass. Far away, something creaked in the skeleton of the museum’s frame.

Sergei closed the book softly. “Ash, fire, cold. And after it all—something else begins. But it’s never what came before.”

Jelena closed her eyes. Her breath was barely audible now, rising and falling like a thread pulling further away from the fabric of the world.

The kitchen was dim, the single bulb hanging by its wire flickering in irregular pulses. A cup of water sat on the table, surface still, gathering a thin layer of rust flakes from the ceiling. Jelena sat wrapped in a blanket, her body hunched over like an old willow bent by wind. Neron stood by the stove, long since useless, warming his hands on the idea of heat more than anything real.

She watched him quietly for a while, the silence between them only broken by the occasional groan of the building's bones.

"Neron," she said softly, voice dry as dust.

He turned his head toward her.

"Do you believe in souls?"

He said nothing for a moment. Then he walked over, pulling a chair out slowly and sitting across from her. His eyes were hollow with fatigue, lids bruised, his jaw beginning to show signs of rash. He looked down at his hands before answering.

"No," he said. "Not like people used to think. Not some ghost that floats away when you die."

Jelena nodded, staring at the corner of the table. "Then it's all gone? When we stop breathing, it ends?"

He shook his head slowly. "I don't think it ends. I think it sinks."

She looked at him, uncertain.

He went on. "Like rain into earth. We don't rise—we seep. The earth remembers us, even if no one else does. The soil takes everything: bones, breath, the trace of movement. Maybe not a soul, but something stays. The weight of living. The mark of it."

Jelena closed her eyes for a moment, nodding. "Then that's better than nothing."

"Maybe," Neron said. "Maybe the trees that won't grow back, the animals that won't return—they carry what we were. Not as names. Just... a kind of echo."

She opened her eyes again, slower this time. "Do you think the earth grieves?"

"No," he said. "The earth doesn't grieve. It absorbs. It carries. It forgets only slowly."

The silence returned. The bulb above them buzzed faintly.

After a while, Jelena whispered, "I hope it forgets the worst parts first."

Neron didn't answer. He looked down at the floor, where their shadows touched but didn't cross. Then he nodded once, a small motion. A quiet agreement not to speak of such things again.

The morning never quite arrived, not in the way mornings used to. The air remained the same pale dimness, the yellow mist outside thick as ever, unmoved by time. The lights no longer worked. The old generator had fallen silent two days ago, and Sergei hadn't tried to fix it again. He lit a candle, the flame unsteady in the damp, and made his way to the room where Jelena had taken to sleeping.

She lay on the makeshift bed near the wall, wrapped in the same blanket from the kitchen, her head tilted slightly toward the fossil table. The waxy light glimmered across her face, catching the shallow bruises beneath her eyes, the dull brown patches across her neck and collarbone. Her mouth hung slightly open, but no breath stirred from it. The air was still.

Sergei stepped closer, slow and quiet. He didn't need to touch her. He knew.

Her hand was closed loosely around something, fingers stiff in their final pose. He knelt beside her and gently lifted her palm. The stone shape was small, oval, with the faint ridges of an ancient trilobite etched into its surface—one she had picked out herself just days before, when her hands could still grasp without pain.

He held it between his fingers, looking at its ancient grooves. It had been dead for over four hundred million years, locked in stone beneath ocean floors long turned to mountain, and now it rested in the hand of a woman who had lived just long enough to see the world die again.

Sergei placed the fossil back into her palm and closed her fingers over it.

He sat with her in the quiet. No one else stirred in the lower levels. Even the building seemed to withhold breath.

After some time, he rose and fetched an old museum sheet, one used once to cover exhibits. He unfolded it and spread it slowly over her body, tucking it along the edges of her form with slow, reverent movements.

No words passed his lips.

The candle flickered low, its flame bending toward nothing. Outside, the wind pressed faintly against the fractured walls, whispering against the stone.

They chose a quiet corner of the lower archives where the wall had partially collapsed, revealing a hollow between the foundation stones. It was dry there, the earth packed tight beneath centuries of weight, and no leaking pipe reached it. Sergei lit two candles, placing one on each side, their light trembling against the shelves of disordered records and forgotten catalogues.

Jelena's body, wrapped in the museum sheet, was laid upon a tarp and slowly drawn through the corridor. Her face remained covered. Only her hands, folded neatly over her chest, held the faint curve of the fossil still enclosed in her fingers. The air in the archive was thick with the smell of mildew and paper left too long without touch.

Neron followed behind with slow steps, carrying the item he had selected for her—an old Roman coin, tarnished and worn but with the faint outline of an emperor's face still visible beneath the grime. He hadn't said which emperor. Perhaps it didn't matter. They were all the same now: silent, cold, buried.

They lowered her into the hollow gently, the sheet folding inward like water finding its shape. For a while they stood there, just breathing, just looking. Then Neron knelt and leaned close. With quiet hands, he pulled back the sheet just enough to reveal her mouth. It had fallen slightly open in death. Her skin was pale, gray in the candlelight.

He placed the coin beneath her tongue.

"For the ferryman," he said, barely louder than a breath.

Sergei nodded, saying nothing. He reached down and drew the sheet closed again, smoothing the edges over her brow. Together they pushed the stones into place, covering the hollow, sealing her into the archive's wall. Dust rose with every stone, catching the candlelight like motes of ash.

When the last rock had been laid, they stood in silence.

Sergei said, "The dead keep the company of memory."

Neron looked at the sealed wall. "Then she's not alone."

The candlelight danced along the shelves, casting flickering shadows over the names of things once preserved, now forgotten. Outside the room, the museum waited, holding its breath. The quiet deepened, untouched by time or sound.

Cold Machinery

The hum of the generator had become a ragged cough. Once a steady, pulsing drone that filled the lower halls with a faint promise of function, it now sputtered in irregular gasps, as if choking on its own rust. The light bulbs flickered like dying fireflies, their glow dimmer by the hour. Sergei stood beside the old machine, hands braced on his knees, watching it shudder as it groaned through another cycle.

He pulled the lever down and the machine wheezed to a halt. Silence returned, thick and immediate. Only the faint drip of water echoed from the pipe overhead, tapping into a stained metal bowl in the corner.

Sergei opened the side panel and knelt beside the machine. His fingers moved slowly, inspecting the wires, the bolts, the fuel line already patched with brittle tape. The bolt he had once scavenged from the old motorcycle still held—but now everything around it seemed to be crumbling.

He sighed and reached for a box of parts—a mess of old Soviet nuts, half-broken wires, dented washers. He sifted through them, pulling pieces into the flickering light, turning them in his hands. Each one more useless than the last.

He tried adjusting a coil, tightening a screw with shaking fingers, wiping rust from a connector. But the more he touched, the more it became clear: the heart of the thing had failed. The teeth of the mechanism were too corroded. The wiring had blackened with age and heat. Fuel leaked from a hairline crack in the tank, pooling in a dark smear beneath the base.

He sat back on the cold floor, wiping his hands on a rag already stained with grease and blood. The silence returned. No clicks, no low whine. Just the dim, damp breath of the underground.

“Chyort,” he whispered, the word dry and sour in his throat.

He leaned against the wall, head back, closing his eyes for a moment. He could hear the museum above, the building moaning with cold and wind and silence. The dim light of the candle flickered on the workbench, casting shadows that twitched like exhausted limbs.

The generator stood motionless beside him. Once a lifeline. Now just another corpse.

He didn't rise. Didn't try again. He simply sat there, defeated, listening to the stillness pressing in from every side.

The kitchen was quiet, colder than before, though the air held no real chill—only the absence of life. With the generator silent, the refrigerator had given its final rattle sometime during the night. Now it stood like a box of death, the seal broken, warmth creeping in through every crack. The small light inside no longer flickered when opened. It was just a dark cavity filled with rot.

Neron stood in front of it with a cloth over his mouth, lifting each can one by one. The metal had started to bulge. One hissed faintly when he touched it, a telltale sign that something inside had turned.

“Gone,” he muttered, placing the spoiled tin into a rusted bucket at his feet. “All gone.”

He worked slowly, carefully. No one spoke. Sergei sat in the corner of the kitchen, elbows on knees, staring into the darkened hallway beyond the door. The candle on the table burned low, wax crawling over its base like slow ice.

Neron lifted the sack containing the calf leg, once frozen, now soft and discolored. He carried it outside, up through the museum's skeletal main floor, stepping over collapsed beams and fragments of statues that had long since lost their meaning.

He pushed open the cracked side door. The wind met him like breath from a dying throat—thin, dry, faintly metallic. The city lay in its permanent dusk, the yellow sky hung low and heavy over the ash-coated rubble.

He walked to a nearby crater where the stone had split open during the blast, a bowl of earth and broken pavement. With both hands, he hurled the calf leg into the pit. It landed with a dull thud, flesh slapping against concrete.

A swarm of silent flies lifted from the edge, disturbed from whatever they had been feeding on. A few black birds circled above the building, too thin to be vultures, too persistent to die.

Neron stood there a moment, watching the spoiled meat in the rubble, half expecting something to come crawl out and take it. But nothing did.

He turned back toward the museum, his boots crunching over old glass, the door creaking behind him. Inside, the silence pressed heavier with every hour. The food was going. The warmth was gone. The dark came earlier each day.

The lamplight had long since failed, and now the only glow came from the stub of a candle balanced on an overturned tin. Its flame threw long shadows across the walls of the archive room, catching on pipes and old photographs, on stone busts and curled paper maps. Sergei sat at the table where he had read so many days before, the fossil book open in front of him, though his eyes did not move across the page. His hands were folded, fingers knotted in thought.

Neron sat across from him, face drawn, hunched beneath the folds of a patched military coat. He had taken to silence these past days, speaking only when necessity called. Now he watched Sergei with tired eyes, waiting.

Sergei finally spoke, voice rasped but steady.

"All our machines," he said, almost to himself. "And none could save us."

Neron exhaled slowly, looking toward the fossil shelves. "They were never meant to save us. Only to delay the end."

Sergei nodded faintly. "That's the truth. Every screw, every wire... bought us a little time. Oxygen, heat, canned meat. Lights in the dark. And now—" he looked at the candle, its flame wavering in the still air, "—they've kept us alive just long enough to understand we're finished."

Neron said nothing.

Sergei leaned back, his chair creaking beneath him. “We spent centuries building the tools to extend life. But not the kind of life worth extending. More speed. More power. We mastered electricity and radiation, sent men into orbit... and somehow, we forgot how to live without breaking things.”

A long silence passed between them, as though even the air had paused to listen.

“I used to believe in progress,” Sergei added. “Believed it was our destiny to rise. But look at us now—surrounded by the relics of that belief. Machines rusting beside fossil bones.”

Neron reached over, breaking the stillness, and placed a hand on the table. “Maybe the fossils were wiser. They didn’t try to escape the earth.”

Sergei gave a bitter chuckle. “And we did nothing but run from it. And from ourselves.”

The candle flickered again, its wax forming a pool around the base.

Sergei looked up, eyes glassy in the dim light. “We made machines to conquer nature... but it was always us we needed saving from.”

He fell silent, staring at the open book, the drawn spiral of an ammonite caught in death four hundred million years before either of them had a name.

The cough came without warning, sharp and deep, bending Sergei forward in his chair. His hand shot up to cover his mouth, and when he pulled it away, the cloth was streaked dark with blood. He looked at it for a moment, as if seeing it for the first time, then folded the handkerchief and tucked it silently into his coat.

Neron glanced over from where he sat on the floor, sorting through the dwindling pile of salvage—old wires, buttons, a cracked magnifying glass. He had stopped reacting to the sound of sickness; they all had. But this cough was worse than before. He stood and moved closer, crouching beside Sergei.

“Fever again?” he asked quietly.

Sergei nodded, his forehead slick with sweat, eyes reddened and glassy. His voice was hoarse when he spoke.

“Like a coal under the skin... burning from the chest out.”

He leaned back in his chair, breath ragged. The fossil book was closed now, resting beneath his hand as if he meant to shield it.

“I think this is the end of the end,” Sergei muttered, then gave a faint smile. “And I never even taught them well.”

Neron tilted his head. “Taught who?”

“The children,” Sergei said. “I was a school teacher... history, mostly. A long time ago. A different century. A different world.”

Neron sat on the edge of the table. “I didn’t know.”

Sergei gave a dry cough and reached for a cup of rusty water, but his hand trembled too much. Neron helped him lift it. He drank only a mouthful.

“I never believed half of what I taught,” Sergei said, resting the cup on his knee. “I stood in front of them—rows of faces—and read from books that praised the march of industry, the glory of the state, the wisdom of progress. I knew it was all built on a graveyard. But I taught it anyway. Because it was what was written. And we were told: truth is what holds the roof above your head.”

He closed his eyes for a moment, breath shallow.

“I think I knew, even then, that it would all collapse. Not in bombs, not at first—but in minds. Little betrayals of truth that added up. Lies we wore like uniforms.”

Neron sat quietly, not knowing what to say. The silence wrapped around them again.

“I didn’t tell them the real history,” Sergei continued, softer now. “Not about the purges, the famines, the quiet disappearances. Not about the cost of greatness. I gave them dates and statues. Not memory.”

His hand drifted toward the fossil book again, fingers resting on the cracked cover.

“And now,” he murmured, “no one left to remember anything.”

Neron looked down, his eyes on the floor. “Maybe the earth remembers.”

Sergei nodded once, then coughed again, folding the bloodied cloth tightly in his lap. Outside, the wind howled faintly through broken stone, and somewhere in the building above, a statue tipped slightly in its base, but did not fall.

The morning was a gray smear across the broken skylights, the museum breathing in silence. No footsteps echoed through its ruined halls, no voices stirred beneath its ceilings. Only the whisper of dust shifting in the cold drafts that crept through fractured stone.

Neron moved quietly through the corridor, guided more by instinct than need. He hadn’t seen Sergei since the night before. There had been coughing, the wheezing of breath against heavy cloth, but no call, no final word. Just the deepening quiet.

He stepped into the archive room.

The candle had long gone out. What remained was a stillness so complete it seemed wrong to break it. Sergei sat slumped forward in the chair, head bowed slightly, hands resting loosely in his lap. The fossil book lay open on the table before him, its wide pages lit by the pale morning light that slipped in through the narrow vent high above.

Neron approached slowly. Sergei’s chest did not rise.

On the open page, a chart displayed the Cambrian explosion—burst lines radiating outward in delicate symmetry, each branch a life form long since vanished. Trilobites, early arthropods, strange segmented creatures from a time when sight was still new to the world. At the center, the branching point, life blooming in the deep sea like a sudden fire.

Sergei's glasses lay folded across the chart, resting gently on the spine, as if placed there with care. No sign of struggle. No final gesture of drama. Just stillness.

Neron stood there a long time, watching the figure at the desk, the folded hands, the candle stub beside the cup. The blood-stained handkerchief rested quietly in Sergei's lap. The breath that once whispered words about memory, extinction, and the weight of machines had gone.

He didn't speak. There was nothing left to say.

Outside, the wind had stilled. Inside the museum, nothing moved. The ancient book remained open, its fossil record waiting, patient, untouched. And beside it, a man who had taught history falsely, and died trying to remember it honestly.

Neron reached out and gently closed the book. The soft thump echoed across the empty room.

The days had collapsed into a slow and colorless haze. Time no longer marked itself by light or meal, but by silence—the way it deepened between words, the way the halls of the museum echoed just a little longer before the sound faded to nothing. Only two now moved through the building's hollow body: Neron and his daughter.

She sat curled on a cot made from coats and museum cloth, her small frame draped in a child's winter jacket several sizes too large. Her face, once round and flushed, had grown thin, her cheeks pale and slack. Her lips were dry, her eyes dull as polished stone. She no longer asked questions, no longer hummed softly to herself as she once had. The silence had found her too.

Neron sat beside her, brushing her hair with trembling fingers. It had begun to fall out in strands. Her skin, beneath the collar of her coat, was patchy and mottled, marked with the dull rose-brown lesions that now seemed to spread faster by the hour. She didn't seem to notice. Or maybe she did and said nothing.

"You remember the story about the deer in the woods?" he asked quietly, voice thin with exhaustion. "The one that didn't run when the storm came?"

She didn't answer. Her head rested against his arm, her breath faint but present.

"It stood still," he continued, "while the wind took the trees down around it. It waited. And the storm passed. And it was still there."

He smiled, though the smile didn't reach his eyes. "Maybe that's what we're doing. Waiting for the storm to end."

Her eyes blinked slowly, unfocused.

Neron leaned closer, whispering, “We’ve made it longer than most.”

Still she said nothing.

He looked at her skin again, the spread of the sickness beneath the surface. No amount of water or pills or warmth would slow it now. He knew the signs. He had seen them on Jelena. On Igor. On Sergei.

He wrapped his arms around her more tightly, drawing her into his chest, her breath a small flutter against him.

“I’ll stay with you,” he murmured. “All the way.”

The museum groaned in the wind above them, the sound of old wood and fractured stone shifting with age. No other voices remained. Only this room. Only this breath. Only this silence.

The light was fading again, though no sun had ever truly shone in the yellow sky. It simply dimmed, the world closing in by degrees. In the corner room where Sergei once read, Neron sat hunched beneath the dead lamp, the girl resting against his shoulder, her eyes barely open.

He had found the fossil book where Sergei last left it, beside the candle stub and the folded glasses. He opened it carefully, thumbing through pages filled with diagrams and words that blurred in his tired eyes—long names of ancient creatures, timelines etched in fine lines across epochs he barely understood.

Still, he read.

“...During the Ordovician period, some four hundred eighty million years ago, the seas teemed with life. Brachiopods... bryozoans... cephalopods...”

The girl didn’t move. He paused, not sure what to say next, then continued anyway.

“...The second-largest extinction event occurred at the end of this period. Cold descended suddenly. Ice consumed the waters. Entire phyla vanished.”

He closed the book partway and looked down at her. Her eyes were shut now, her breath light and distant. He wasn’t sure if she slept or merely listened with what little strength she had left.

He set the book aside and brushed the strands of hair from her face.

“You want to hear a song?” he whispered. “One from the old days?”

No answer. But he sang anyway.

His voice was rough, unsteady, but soft enough not to break the quiet.

“Tyomnaya noch, tolko pulya svistit po stepi...”

He sang the old war song, the one his grandfather used to sing, his voice a thread from a time when battles were fought with rifles, not fire from the sky.

The girl’s fingers twitched faintly on his coat. He kept singing, slower now.

“Tolko veter gudit v provodakh, tusklo zvezdy merzayut...”

His eyes stung, and he stopped for a moment, letting the silence hold them. Then he rocked her gently, whispering the words again, not singing now, just reciting.

“We’re still here,” he said. “You and me. Still here.”

Outside, the wind rose, pushing against the fractured windows like the breath of some great animal that had not yet died. But inside, there was only the man, the girl, and the last song.

The night deepened without ceremony, settling over the museum like a heavy cloth. Neron sat with the girl in his arms, her breathing shallow and uneven, her forehead warm against his chest. The candle had burned down to a crooked nub, throwing shadows along the walls that stretched and swayed with every tiny flicker.

Her cough began as a faint rattle, barely more than a trembling in her throat. He shifted, lifting her slightly, trying to ease her air, but the sound grew sharper, wet inside her lungs. She pressed her small hand weakly against his coat, fingers barely able to curl.

“It’s alright,” he whispered, rocking her with a slow rhythm. “Breathe slow. I’m here.”

Another cough tore through her, and this time a thin spray of blood marked the blanket near her chin. She tried to swallow, but the next breath came in ragged fragments. He wiped her mouth with his sleeve, his touch steady.

Her eyes opened once. Just once. A faint glint of recognition flickered there, the shade of a smile she didn’t have strength to form. She tried to speak, but only a faint wheeze escaped.

He held her tighter. “It’s alright,” he murmured, the words soft, without tremor. “I’m here. I won’t go.”

Her breathing fluttered again, then grew softer. Softer still. The rise of her chest slowed, until it was almost nothing. A final shudder ran through her, a last frail grip on the world, and then her body relaxed completely in his arms.

Neron listened for a moment—just to be certain. The silence confirmed what he already knew.

He didn’t cry. Not then. Not later. He only sat with her, feeling her weight grow heavier in stillness. His hand brushed through her hair once, as if smoothing it for sleep.

When the candle finally gave out, he rose. He lifted her gently, wrapped her in the military blanket, folding it around her small frame until only the curve of her covered head could be seen. His movements were careful, deliberate, without wavering.

He carried her down the hall, past the exhibits and broken cases, past the darkened fossils and silent statues. The museum watched him with its hollow eyes. Nothing stirred.

He reached the hollow section of the archives where Jelena rested behind the stones. He placed the girl beside that spot, laying her with the same care, smoothing the blanket one last time.

For a long moment, he stood over her in the quiet. No words came. No prayer. The world had no gods left to petition.

He knelt, touched the wall once with his fingers, then turned and walked away, leaving the yellowed air and the dead halls to gather around her in stillness.

Neron moved through the museum like a shadow loosed from time, each footstep muffled by dust and the settling breath of ruin. He no longer counted the hours, nor tracked the dimming of the air. There was no longer need for such things. Only movement, and the slow unfolding of stillness.

He walked with one hand trailing against the walls, the other brushing the cold stone of statues worn by decades and dust. The bust of Suvorov, of Kutuzov, of forgotten generals stared blankly into space, their carved eyes bearing witness to nothing now. His fingers paused on the chest of a Roman legionnaire, the marble cool beneath his callused skin.

"I'm sorry," he whispered.

He passed the case of rusted swords and broken helmets, remnants of wars fought for vanished flags. There was no more war now. No more cause. Only survivors, and soon not even that.

He turned a corner and entered the long hall of natural exhibits. The air here was cooler. Still. The glass cases stood like tombs, their contents posed in silent dignity. A wolf, frozen mid-snarl. An eagle, wings spread wide. A bear, its coat dimmed with age and dust, forever rising in defense against nothing.

Neron stopped at each, eyes tracing the lines of fur and feather.

"I'm sorry," he said to the wolf.

He stepped forward.

"I'm sorry," to the bear.

"I'm sorry," to the heron locked mid-flight, pinned against a painted sky.

He paused before the mammoth calf. Its small body slumped beneath the dim glass, its eyes hollowed by time, its trunk curled inward like a question left unanswered. The same childlike posture that echoed the girl he had just laid to rest.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered, voice shaking now. “For what we did. For what we couldn’t stop. For thinking we were the only ones that mattered.”

The silence answered him, thick and unwavering. Dust floated through the shafts of gray light like ash in slow descent.

He moved on, passing the insect collection, the cases of shells, the cabinet of extinct birds. In each, he whispered the same. A simple litany. An apology too late.

Somewhere above, a plank creaked in the wind. But down in the halls, it was still, save for the man moving through the bones of the world, offering what little a human voice could give: remorse.

The uniform lay folded where he had left it days before, its fabric stiff with old starch, the colors faded by damp and time. Neron lifted it from the crate and shook the dust from it. The jacket smelled faintly of oil and iron. He slipped his arms into the sleeves, buttoning it slowly, feeling the weight settle across his shoulders as though it had been waiting for him.

The boots were harder to pull on, but he managed, tightening the cracked laces with deliberate care. Last, he took the gun from the shelf—a Kalashnikov with a pitted barrel and rust creeping along the grip. It was heavy in his hands. Heavy in the way something final feels heavy.

He walked to the mammoth hall, each step steady, the echo soft in the long corridor. The mammoth calf stood in its glass case, as it always had, one foot lifted, forever halfway into a world that no longer existed. The dim light from the cracked ceiling cast a pale glow across its worn fur.

Neron dragged a chair across the floor and set it facing the display. He sat slowly, the uniform creasing beneath him. The gun rested across his lap, his hands folded over it, not gripping, just resting. He leaned back slightly, eyes fixed on the small mammoth behind the glass.

For a while there was only the hush of dust settling. The faint shift of wind in the broken frames above. His breath.

Then something moved at the edge of the hall.

A blur at first. A shimmer in the dimness. He didn’t turn his head. He didn’t need to. The air carried a pressure he had felt once before—not wind, not sound, something else.

It stepped into view at the far end of the room.

Gray. Thin. Crouching low, its limbs folded in on themselves, its head large and smooth, eyes dark as unlit wells. The figure stared at him, still as stone. No breath. No tremor. It held the quiet like a second skin.

Neron did not move. His hands remained on the gun, but he did not lift it. His face held no fear now, only a tired acceptance, as though his bones had already made peace with everything the world had become.

The creature tilted its head, slow and deliberate. A gesture like curiosity, or recognition.

The hall grew colder.

Neron looked at it without blinking.

Outside, the yellow air pressed against the shattered windows. Inside, the museum held its silence, and the mammoth calf watched with its glassy eyes, frozen in eternal pause, as the last living man sat still and waited in the company of the extinct.

Quiet

The museum stood in stillness beneath a sky the color of rusted gold, its roof half-collapsed, its walls scorched and split. Time no longer passed within or without—only the wind marked the hours, carrying with it the dust of what once had breath.

On the upper floors, shards of broken glass lay scattered across stone and linoleum, glittering like fragments of dead stars. The wind slid through empty window frames and broken vents, weaving through the halls in thin, mournful whines. When it passed over the glass, it moved them—just slightly—producing a brittle chime that rang out like the faintest echo of music long forgotten.

Somewhere above, a roof beam creaked under its own weight, strained by time and rot, but held. Pieces of plaster floated downward like the first snow of a long-dead season, settling on the heads of toppled statues and the mouths of empty display cases.

The corridors were empty. Paint peeled from the walls like paper memory, exposing the bones of the structure—steel, stone, wire. Every corner, every stairwell, held the hush of absence, thick and unmoving.

Where once boots had tread and voices had whispered, only the sound of air remained. It wandered through the halls, brushing past fossil bones and museum plaques, disturbing the corners of maps curled and browned. Nothing responded. Nothing stirred.

Even the birds that had once circled the ruin were gone now, vanished into the yellow mist that veiled the city. Outside the shattered doors, the concrete remained piled, the metal rusting, the streets unwalked. A dead wind whistled between broken vehicles, and high above, a single cloud hung motionless in a sky too old to change.

Inside, in a hall of forgotten animals, the lights no longer glowed. The silence was complete. The museum endured. Alone.

The yellow mist clung to the air like breath that had nowhere left to go. It did not move, did not swirl, only hung suspended in the lightless sky beyond the fractured roof. Inside the museum, it crept through cracks and shattered panes, mingling with the cold, dry air of the dead interior. It gave weight to the silence, thickening it, pressing against walls that no longer held warmth.

From the broken ceiling, ash drifted in slow descent, pale gray flakes that floated through empty space like snow from a furnace. They settled on the fossil cabinets, on the stone busts, on the coats left behind on iron hooks near the stairwell. Each flake a memory without source.

In one of the great animal halls, a lion stood frozen in its hunting pose, teeth bared, mouth open in a silent roar. Its glass eyes stared forever toward a prey that no longer existed. A single fly crawled across its right eye, trailing dirt and ash as it moved. It paused there, antennae twitching, then flew off with a soft buzz, vanishing into the stillness.

In a side chamber, dark and undisturbed, the wooden frame of a fossil display creaked. The mount had long been cracked, its supports weakened by damp and time. With a groan too soft to be called a sound, the entire assembly slipped free. It fell, striking the floor in a burst of dust and fractured bone—jaw fragments, shell segments, pieces of what was once an ancient sea predator now scattered across the floor in a careless echo of its life.

No one came to lift it.

The corridors remained empty. The air hung heavy, its yellow hue deepening where it met old light. Papers still lay across the tables in the archives, undisturbed. The last candle had collapsed into a pool of wax days ago. The scent of oil and mold clung to the stone.

Above, near what remained of the dome, a single shaft of light filtered through the broken roof—angled just enough to pierce the upper galleries. It passed through dust and mist, catching on the dull glint of shattered display glass, and stretched down into the central hall.

There, in its path, stood the mammoth calf.

The beam struck its eye, catching the curve of the dark orb, and for a moment, gave it the faint illusion of life. A glimmer. A reflection. As though something still watched behind the glass. But the mammoth did not move. It stood, as always, frozen in its lonely motion.

The light wavered. The dust shifted. And the silence held.

Night fell without fanfare. There was no sunset—only the slow deepening of shadow as the yellow sky dimmed to bruised gray, and then to black. No stars pierced the mist. The heavens remained hidden, cloaked behind a veil of poisoned air and ash too thick to let anything shine.

The museum, already quiet, seemed to hold its breath as the final light slipped away. Its broken dome vanished into darkness, its shattered windows reflecting nothing. The halls, once filled with the measured steps of survivors, now held only cold and time. The air was still. Even the wind had abandoned the ruins.

Within the great halls, the mammoth calf stood in shadow, the beam of light from earlier long since faded. Its glass eye now dull, lifeless again. The lion stood frozen in mid-pounce, the wolf crouched in silence. Bones rested where they had fallen. Fossils lay undisturbed. There were no footsteps now. No voices. No breathing.

In the archive room, the chairs remained where they had last been used. The fossil book lay closed, the folded glasses untouched. The last page turned by a hand now gone. Nearby, the stone walls held the hush of earth, the silence of the underground, deeper than sound, deeper than memory.

Outside, the city stretched in ruin beneath the night sky. Collapsed buildings slept beneath blankets of dust. Streets lay broken, gutted, filled with the frozen aftermath of lives interrupted. Cars rusted where they had overturned. Windows stared blankly from empty frames.

No fire burned. No machines stirred. No signal blinked in the void.

Under that silence, beneath layers of rubble and ash, buried in the cracked foundations of a once-living world, lay the last breath of humankind. No monument marked the moment. No voice named the end. It passed like a sigh into the dark, carried into the soil with the bones of every other forgotten thing.

And the museum stood, alone, watching nothing. Waiting for nothing. Quiet at last.